



TRANSFORMATIONS
comparative study of social transformations



CSST
WORKING PAPERS
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor

GENDER, HISTORY AND DECONSTRUCTION:
JOAN WALLACH SCOTT'S
GENDER AND THE POLITICS OF HISTORY

WILLIAM H. SEWELL, JR.

CSST Working
Paper #34

CRSO Working
Paper #400

August 1989

Gender, History, and Deconstruction:

Joan Wallach Scott's Gender and the Politics of History

William H. Sewell, Jr.

University of Michigan

Please do not cite or quote without permission.

Gender, History, and Deconstruction:

Joan Wallach Scott's Gender and the Politics of History¹

Over the past two decades, feminist scholarship has established a solid position in the historical profession. Courses on the history of women draw big enrollments, university presses vie for books in the field, and large cohorts of graduate students in the major universities are working on dissertations on women's historical experience. Given all these signs of success, are there reasons to worry about the future of women's history? In this stimulating book, Joan Wallach Scott identifies what she regards as troubling intellectual and political weaknesses in the mainstream project of women's history and sketches out an alternative approach that is strongly influenced by post-structuralism.

Versions of all the essays that comprise the book have been published previously elsewhere. But this is far more than just a collection of essays; indeed, several of its chapters have been substantially rewritten to assure that the book develops a coherent and consistent argument. After a lucid introduction sketching out the main themes of the book, Scott proceeds to two essays that state her approach to the history of gender and distinguish it from alternatives -- the first a review and critique of the main lines of development in women's history, the second her instant classic "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,"² which argues that the history of gender should focus on the social and political construction of the meaning of sexual difference, and which remains the most convincing statement to date of her particular perspective. The second section of the book is made up of critiques of Gareth Stedman Jones and E. P. Thompson, in which she argues convincingly that both of these historians, in spite of their deep disagreements about the history of early nineteenth-century labor radicalism, unwittingly reproduce in their own writing the highly gendered

understanding of class initially constructed by the early socialists, trade unionists, and Chartists whom they study.

The third section comprises three essays based on Scott's own empirical research on mid-nineteenth-century French working women. The first explores the sharply different discourses and work identities developed by male and female Parisian garment workers in response to the degradation of their trade in the 1830s and 1840s. The second deconstructs a statistical report on the Parisian labor force whose numerical form has led historians to treat it as "objective" when it was in fact a highly political document drawn up by the Chambre de Commerce to refute workers' claims of class oppression. The third examines the construction of a gendered division of labor in the work of French political economists. The essays making up the fourth and final section explore the feminist conundrum of "equality vs difference" in the politics of women historians. The first examines the notorious "Sears Case," in which historians of women testified as experts on opposite sides in a major sex discrimination lawsuit, and the second ponders the history of women in the American historical profession in the century following the establishment of the American Historical Association in 1884.

Throughout, Scott criticizes current conventions of historical practice and argues for her alternative post-structuralist approach with a lucidity and forthrightness that should be disconcerting to those historians (surely the solid majority of our profession) who would like to dismiss the post-structuralist project as pretentious and obscurantist word-play. Because Scott steadfastly refuses to abandon her historian's plain style of writing even when she urges the abandonment of conventional historical theories and epistemologies, this is a defense of post-structuralism that historians will find uncomfortably difficult to ignore.

Scott begins her book with a critique of mainstream women's history. She points out in her first chapter that up to now most women's history has been written within two overlapping traditions -- as social history or as "her-story." When the feminist movement revived in the late 1960s and early 1970s, social history was already establishing itself as the major challenge to traditional political history, and the history of women fit fairly comfortably into the social historical project. Social historians attempted to displace the central questions of history from the deeds of statesmen to large-scale processes of social change as experienced by ordinary people. Because this entailed a focus on groups hitherto excluded from the central story line of history -- racial and ethnic minorities, workers, peasants -- it was relatively easy to add women to the list. Scott admits the achievements of women's history in the social historical mode -- indeed, she has been a major contributor to this kind of work.³ But she concludes that women's history written within the social history tradition has also limited the development of feminist perspectives because it has tended to accept uncritically social history's economic determinist epistemological perspective. Historians writing in this tradition have typically reduced

human agency to a function of economic forces and made gender groups one of its many by-products....Feminist questions about the distinctiveness of women and the centrality of social relations between the sexes tend to be displaced by or subsumed within economist and behaviorist models. (22)

Consequently, for most social historians of women "gender is not an issue requiring study in itself." (22)

"Her-story," the other major mode of women's history, grew up at essentially the same time as the social history of women; indeed, the two genres have often been blurred in practice. But as Scott sees it, their goals, assumptions, and limitations are quite distinct. Whereas social history has tended to minimize the importance of gender distinctions and of women's agency, "her-story" has attempted precisely to chronicle the distinct experiences of women and to insist that women's agency has been crucial in the making of their history. Once again, its successes are obvious. But here too, Scott sees certain dangers, the most serious of which is ghettoization. "Her-story"

tends to isolate women as a special and separate topic of history....For those interested there is now a growing and important history of women to supplement and enrich conventional histories, but it can too easily be consigned to the "separate sphere" that has long been associated exclusively with the female sex. (21-2)

All of this adds up to a difficult predicament for women's history, at least as it is currently practiced. Social history can include women in the grand narrative of changing socioeconomic structures, but does so at the cost of suppressing the ways that gender distinctions differ from other social distinctions. Gender, consequently, remains at the margins of a history dominated by narratives of modernization or the development of capitalism. Her-story, by contrast, insists on the difference between men's and women's experiences, but in doing so constructs a separate narrative of women's history. This leaves the existing grand narrative of history, now coded male, intact at the center, and again relegates women's history to the periphery -- where it may safely be studied by women. Neither of the existing modes of women's history constitutes a fundamental challenge to the male actors and the male-dominated institutions that have traditionally been assumed to be the subject matter of

history. Textbooks and courses may, optionally, include units on women; the chapter on industrialization may now discuss the effects of economic changes on the family or on the sexual division of labor in the work force. But even after two decades of feverish research in women's history, the central story line of Western history -- about the emergence of the modern state and the capitalist economy -- can still be told without serious consideration of gender issues.

This predicament of women's history is paralleled by an analogous predicament of feminism in general, often known as the "equality vs difference" debate. Scott discusses this debate lucidly in her chapter on the Sears Case. The "equality" position argues that "sexual difference ought to be an irrelevant consideration in schools, employment, the courts and the legislature," whereas the "difference" position argues "that appeals on behalf of women ought to be made in terms of the needs, interests, and characteristics common to women as a group." (167) But, according to Scott, conceptualizing the debate as opposing equality and difference forces us into

an impossible choice. If one opts for equality, one is forced to accept the notion that difference is antithetical to it. If one opts for difference, one admits that equality is unattainable....Feminists cannot give up 'difference'; it has been our most creative analytic tool. We cannot give up equality, at least as long as we want to speak to the principles and values of a democratic political system....How then do we recognize and use notions of sexual difference and yet make arguments for equality? (172)

Scott's answer is that we must adopt a deconstructive strategy, refusing the dichotomy that opposes equality to difference in the first place. Her deconstruction is brief, elegant, and crystal clear. Equality, she points out, should not be opposed to difference. The opposite of difference is not equality,

but sameness or identity: "if individuals or groups were identical or the same there would be no need to ask for equality." (173) Equality actually means "the ignoring of differences between individuals for a particular purpose or in a particular context..."; it "presumes a social agreement to consider obviously different people as equivalent (not identical) for a stated purpose" (172) -- for example, for citizenship rights. "The political notion of equality thus includes, indeed depends on, an acknowledgement of the existence of differenceEquality...might well be defined as deliberate indifference to specified differences." (173) Far from being opposed to difference, equality is unthinkable except on the ground of differences.

The plural is crucial. One of the traps of the "equality vs difference" formulation is that it implicitly accepts a stable categorical distinction between men and women. Rather than fixating on an overriding and seemingly timeless difference of kind between male and female, Scott urges us to consider a whole range of differences -- not only between women and men, but among women, among men, between and within racial, ethnic, or cultural groups, and, of course, over time. Only a "deconstructive" political and intellectual strategy, she argues, can hope to rescue us from the impossible choice of "equality vs difference." We must challenging the habit of dichotomous thinking and its "powerful tendencies [to] construct the world in binary terms." (176)

"...The critical feminist position must always involve two moves: the first, systematic criticism of the operations of categorical difference, exposure of the kinds of exclusions and inclusions -- the hierarchies -- it constructs, and a refusal of their ultimate "truth." A refusal, however, not in the name of an equality that implies sameness or identity but rather (and this is the second move) of an equality that rests on differences -- differences that confound, disrupt, and render ambiguous the meaning of any

fixed binary opposition. To do anything else is to buy into the political argument that sameness is a requirement for equality, an untenable position for feminists (and historians) who know that power is constructed on, and so must be challenged from, the ground of difference. (176-7)

This deconstructionist political argument about the equality vs difference debate, although fully spelled out only in the next to last chapter, is in fact the subtext of Scott's entire book. Her critique of mainstream women's history, for example, is strictly parallel to her analysis of the "equality vs difference" controversy. The social history and her-story strategies in women's history, as presented by Scott, are actually historical versions of the two strategies of mainstream feminism. Her-story is women's history under the sign of difference: its goal is to demonstrate that women have always had a history different from men, and it implies that the male-female dichotomy is a fundamental and immutable fact of history, however much the particularities of male-female relations may have changed over time. Social history, which plays down gender differences by casting them as outcomes of economic causes and processes, is women's history under the sign of "equality," since it implies that the achievement of genuine economic equality would abolish gender difference. Her-story assumes at base that male-female difference is an immutable fact; social history assumes that it is an epiphenomenon, with no independent reality. Scott's criticism of her-story and social history, then, are no less political than her rejection of the "equality vs difference" problematic of feminist politics. The entire book, as the title implies, is an attempt to find an acceptable feminist "politics of history," one that will contribute to the project of constructing equality on the ground of differences.

Scott's proposal for a renewal of feminist historical practice is to shift from "women's history" to the history of gender and to employ a post-structuralist conceptualization of gender. Scott spells out her notion of gender above all in her essay "Gender, A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." She begins by criticizing the three major existing theoretical approaches to gender. Two of these, patriarchy theory and psychoanalysis, founder on the familiar shoal of positing an ultimately fixed difference between men and women, while the third, Marxist feminism, founders on the opposite shoal by positing gender difference as an epiphenominal product of material forces. Scott's conceptualization, by contrast, insists that gender is central and powerful in social life (it definitely is not epiphenominal) but is also mutable and historically constructed.

Scott, like most contemporary feminists, uses the term "gender" to refer to socially or culturally constructed sexual difference (rather than "sex," which implies differences rooted in biology). Gender consists of a set of "culturally available symbols," together with "normative concepts" that prescribe an interpretation of the symbols, typically in the form of "a fixed binary opposition, categorically and unequivocally asserting the meaning of male and female, masculine and feminine." (43) These interpretations are embodied in institutions -- and not only kinship institutions -- and give rise to subjective masculine and feminine identities. Finally, gender is "a primary way of signifying relationships of power." Gender metaphors are used to signify -- and hence to construct -- all kinds of unequal social relations that have no intrinsic connection to sexual difference. In this sense, gender is not just a matter of sex roles, but is "an aspect of social organization generally." (6)

What is original about this conceptualization of gender is Scott's insistence that gender is extended via metaphor from the realm of male-female relations to power relations generally, and that this makes gender an important constituent of virtually all institutional realms -- of class, warfare, spirituality, diplomacy, race, or political economy. This is an important and contentious argument. If accepted, it implies that "women's history," reconceptualized as the history of gender, can no longer be contained in its ghetto; it establishes for gender an imperative claim on the grand narrative of history. But acceptance of this claim about gender depends on an acceptance of Scott's notions about the role of language in history and in social life.

Scott is an enthusiastic participant in the "linguistic turn": she approvingly cites Foucault's identification of power and knowledge (2) and throughout the book language and meaning are treated as constitutive of social and political life. Although she criticizes Gareth Stedman Jones's argument about "the languages of class" in Chartism, she agrees in essence that (as she paraphrases him) "there is no social reality outside or prior to language" (56). If language or symbols are constitutive of power, and if gender metaphors are ubiquitous in signifying power in all institutional spheres, then it follows that a society's conceptions of gender structure power relations generally, not just in relations between the sexes. It also follows that male/female relations in the routines of ordinary life are intimately, multiply, and reciprocally connected to hierarchies of power in the commanding centers of society -- in churches, states, and parties.

This complex entanglement of state power and quotidian gender relations might be construed as leaving little room for effective political action on questions of gender. If gender significations are built into institutions at every level from the family to the state, constantly reaffirming a hard and fast

dichotomy between the rational, powerful, public male and the emotional, vulnerable, private female, where can feminists find the space to develop an alternative perspective? Here Scott's post-structuralism is crucial. The "prison house of language" effect -- the implication that language constructs meanings so powerful and pervasive as to overwhelm the possibility of human agency -- is a familiar structuralist conundrum, for example in Althusser or the early Foucault.⁴ What makes post-structuralists post-structuralist is that they accept the notion that language fundamentally structures all of human experience; what makes them post-structuralist is that they insist that meaning is is always and intrinsically contestable, unstable, undecidable. As Scott puts it, any positive definition rests

on the negation or repression of something represented as antithetical to it. And categorical oppositions repress the internal ambiguities of either category. Any unitary concept rests on -- contains -- repressed or negated material and so is unstable, not unified. (7)

This is as true of the seemingly "natural" and permanent dichotomies of gender as of any other meanings.

Scott's deconstructive strategy turns the mutual reinforcement of quotidian and grand ideological invocations of gender difference from a prisonhouse into a strategic advantage. By attacking the edifice of gender meanings at its weakest point -- its aggressive but vulnerable assertion of a stable dichotomy of male and female -- feminists can undermine, disarticulate, sap, in a word, deconstruct contemporary power relations. The task of feminist historians is to expose relentlessly the repressions, hierarchizations, contradictions, silences, and gaps in representations of gender -- both those employed by historical actors and those employed by historians. By demonstrating that gender difference is not permanent, but variable, contested, and politically constructed, historians can

contribute significantly to building an equality based on a recognition of the inevitability and desirability of multiple difference.

In addition to developing this theoretical argument for a post-structuralist approach to gender, Scott also presents examples of both historical critique and historical practice based on such an approach. Parts two and three of her book constitute an illuminating study of the politics of gender in class formation. The core of the argument, in vastly oversimplified form, is that male workers, threatened by the advance of industrial capitalism, responded in highly gendered ways to what they saw as threats to their masculinity (e.g., their "manhood," or their "independence"), forming a specifically male form of combative community (what came to be known as "class") to protect their standing as heads of households and members of the social and political order. In this process of defending themselves and their families against capitalism and its agents, workingmen contributed (often unwittingly) to the marginalization of women as workers and as members of the state and society. The gendering of class was not solely the fault of male workers, to be sure; among other things, male workers picked up certain of these gender assumptions from the bourgeois political economists who were among their most important ideological adversaries. In any case, these gender politics of class formation were largely unrecognized or unavowed by those involved in the struggle, and typically have been equally unrecognized by historians of class formation. Consequently, a gendered notion of class has either been inadvertently transcribed into their histories (this seems to have been the case with Gareth Stedman Jones) or actually elaborated rhetorically (as seems to have been the case with E. P. Thompson), without any recognition of the consequences for the politics of gender in the present.⁵ As a

historian of class formation who until recently has been perfectly oblivious about this fundamentally important gender dynamic, which was no less present in France than in England, I can testify personally to the power and insight of Scott's deconstructive critique.⁶

Scott has not, of course, written a full history of the gendering of class in the few short chapters devoted to the subject in this book. But she has accomplished enough to demonstrate the importance of the process and to point the way toward a fuller history. She has specified some of the most important politico-linguistic mechanisms of the exclusion of women from full membership in the class community. Her account also makes it clear, without going into the details, that here the gendered politics of language are much more than just so much talk. The gendering of class that Scott outlines has had real, lasting, and concrete consequences for women's experiences -- in politics, at work, in the family, and in labor movements.

The historiographical potential of Scott's approach is not as fully demonstrated for other topics, although she does provide an intriguing sketch of how it might be applied to the analysis of politics and political theory at the end of her essay on "Gender, a Useful Category of Historical Analysis." (45-50) But the implications of what she has provided seem to me exceptionally rich. One implication, which she fails to draw out, is the possibility of a new "his-story" to parallel "her-story." One of the problems of the existing "her-story" approach is that in elaborating a separate history of women's experience it implicitly codes the existing central narrative of history as male. Scott's argument implies that this is quite inaccurate, since ideas and power relations concerning male-female difference are in fact built into all kinds of institutions that figure prominently in the central narrative: firms, classes, parties, states, courts, and so on. Such institutions are, with rare exceptions,

male dominated, but they all incorporate male and female, masculine and feminine, albeit in hierarchized forms. Such central institutions are certainly gendered but they should not be coded as male.

As Scott points out, most forcefully in her essay on the American historical profession, traditional history has implicitly assumed that "a single prototypical figure represented the historical subject: white, Western man." By assuming a universal male as the subject of history, Scott does not mean that historians

excluded women from their conception; they did not. Rather they subsumed women, included them in a generalized, unified conception that was at once represented in the idea of Man, but was always different from and subordinate to it. The feminine was but a particular instance; the masculine a universal signifier. (183)

One of the most pressing tasks of feminist history is to displace and problematize this universal male subject of history. One means of doing so is to elaborate, by means of deconstructive critiques of the sort carried out by Scott in this book, the profoundly gendered character of the institutions we have normally assumed to be adequately represented by male subjects, and to demonstrate the presence of women and female agency in the historical processes by which these institutions change and develop. But equally imperative for the task of dethroning the universal male subject is to undertake studies that will reveal the particularity of male identity and male agency. This will require the elaboration of a "his-story" parallel to the existing "her-story." We need, for example, studies of the formation of masculine gender identity in families, businesses, clubs, apprenticeship, seminaries, clientage, fraternities, and armies; studies that will illuminate the ways in which male activities in major public and private institutions are shaped and limited by the particular

character of their male identities. Until all historical subjects, including white middle-class males, are understood as particular, the universal male subject will not be dislodged from the minds and texts of most historians and the project of constructing equality on the ground of differences will be chimerical. A few promising beginnings have been made, but his-story remains, to date, virtually uncharted territory.⁷

Early reactions to Scott's book indicate that it will be highly controversial. Louise Tilly, at the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association in 1988, criticized Scott for abandoning social history to pursue intellectual history, and Claudia Koonz, in a hostile review in The Women's Review of Books denounced her as a member of the "post-industrialist, post-Marxist, post-Structuralist and post-modernist academic avant guard," whose denial that "the social world is determined by class, technology, or other material factors," results in "relinquishing the search for causality" and consequently in political impotence.⁸ Both Tilly and Koonz fault Scott for ignoring women's experience, which for them is the touchstone of women's history. It should be obvious by now that I regard such criticisms as misplaced. But it would be too much to say that they are utterly unfounded. The essays in this book are focused either on the development of theory or on critical analyses of language -- either the language of contemporary historians or that of past historical actors. Even Scott's relatively detailed study of male and female work identities in the garment trades of mid-nineteenth-century Paris has far more to say about how men and women talked and wrote about their work identities than about how these identities informed their experiences of work, family life, leisure, and politics. In fact, the only essay that creates powerful links

between the linguistic encodation of gender and the concrete experience of women is her final essay on women in the American historical profession.

This preference for language over experience is also detectable in many of the passages Scott devotes to theory. Here, it seems to me, Scott has accepted Derridian and literary deconstructionism too uncritically, and has not sufficiently considered the problems inherent in appropriating a theoretical vocabulary initially developed in philosophy and literary criticism for the study of history.⁹ Here it is symptomatic that Scott explicitly minimizes the differences between history and literature in her introduction. She argues that any hard and fast distinction between history and literature vanishes if we adopt a perspective that

takes the production of cultural knowledge as its object and is concerned with analyzing how various forms of knowledge are produced. History and literature are such forms of knowledge, whether we take them as disciplines or as bodies of cultural information. As such, both are susceptible to the same kind of analysis, one that is directed to concepts, meanings, linguistic codes, and the organization of representation. This analytic approach takes seriously the boundaries of disciplines and the different genres they represent but makes these a matter for investigation, rather than a set of preconditions for scholarly work. (8)

Much in this statement is commendable. It is true that disciplines tend to be hypostatized by their practitioners, suppressing commonalities across disciplines as well as suppressing gaps and contradictions within them. History and literature as professions are surely better understood as constituted by different genres of writing about cultural knowledge than as sovereign and autonomous pursuits. But in this passage Scott slides over important differences between the objects of literary and historical study, which get obscured by the

similarity between the disciplines of history and literary criticism. It is unproblematically true that the disciplines of history and literary criticism are producers of cultural knowledge, and that texts produced by both disciplines are susceptible to analyses of concepts, meanings, linguistic codes, and the organization of representation. The same is unquestionably true of the object of literary study -- literary texts. But what about the object of historical study?

It may conceivably be acceptable to designate the object of historical study as "bodies of cultural information," depending on what one means by "bodies," "cultural," and "information," although it would surely be clearer to designate history's object as something like human experience in the past. Nor is it very controversial to claim that historians need to analyze the concepts, meanings, linguistic codes, and organizations of representation utilized in past societies. It is also true that historians study texts. But the fact that the object of historians' study is human experience rather than texts as such implies important distinctions between literature and history, distinctions that Scott's formulation suppresses. In this respect, I see two crucial distinctions between historical and literary scholarship: a difference in the interpretive task facing the scholar and a difference in the place of language in the disciplines' objects of study.

First the interpretive task. Most of the information historians use to reconstruct the past is contained in written texts, and for this reason historians, like literary critics, need to read them critically -- to search out their themes, silences, ambiguities, intertextualities, and hierarchizations. But the historian's ultimate goal in reading texts is to understand a world that is manifested, reflected, refracted, or referred to in the texts but that is different from and not homologous with the texts. Historians, to put it differently, use texts to make inferences about and thereby to reconstruct

imaginatively a world that is only imperfectly and incompletely signified in the available textual documents. On the basis of textual evidence they must posit the existence of and fashion accounts of social worlds -- of actors, motives, habits, beliefs, institutions, social structures, meaning complexes -- whose operations are hypothesized to produce the texts they interpret. The concepts, meanings, linguistic codes, and organizations of representation discovered in historians' documents are assumed to belong to and to structure the world that gave rise to the documents, but they alone are not sufficient to explain the "experience" that historians seek to learn about from texts. This is true because the historian's object, unlike the literary critic's, is composed not of language tout court but of human beings who use language.

This brings us to the second difference between history and literature. Literary texts are made up of language. Consequently to decode the linguistic conventions of the text is to lay bare its most basic structure. But human social worlds, while they too are deeply structured by linguistic conventions, differ from texts in (at least) two respects: they are structured by more than linguistic conventions, and they are also structured by linguistic conventions in different ways than texts. (1) Human social worlds are composed of natural as well as conventional elements -- biological processes of birth, death, and maturation, climate, geological features, plant and animal life, the succession of seasons, and so on. They are also composed of humanly fashioned elements that are not exclusively linguistic in character -- technologies, capital stocks, geographical patterns, and the like.

(2) Even to the extent (very great, in my opinion) that human social worlds are structured by linguistic conventions, they are structured differently than texts. Language in society is used by people to do things -- to impress or coerce others, to make claims on resources, to complain, to struggle, to

establish friendships, to express joy. When language is put to use in human social worlds, it is also always put at risk, since it is used to communicate some sort of message to others who can routinely be expected to have interests and desires at variance with one's own. To put it otherwise, language used in the world always comes with wills attached, and its effects are an outcome not only of the meaning that the statement has to any particular language user, or to language users in general, but of the balance of power or persuasion in the circumstance in which it is used. While it makes a great deal of difference what arguments, allusions, or metaphors are used, it also matters who uses them, how they are interpreted, reinterpreted, or appropriated by their auditors or readers, and what resources different language users have at their disposal for establishing their meanings as authoritative. Because the use of language is a social and political process, the meaning of linguistic utterances is deflected from any linear logical or semantic unfolding by the push and pull of human interactions. Meanings, consequently, often diverge from the intentions of those who make the utterances. Hence, not only do human social worlds include important determinants that are not linguistic in character, but the process of meaning determination itself is not exclusively linguistic. The signification of statements is not fully given by their syntactical and semantic character, but depends on the social process of struggle over meaning.

None of this means that we should abandon the sort of deconstructive strategies that Scott advocates. Quite the contrary: I believe that with some amendments, deconstructive approaches are particularly suitable for analyzing language in human social worlds, past or present. I would argue that the famous instability of meaning that deconstructionists treat as a feature of language itself must also be understood as a consequence of the employment of language to do things in social worlds that are composed of variously situated and willful

human beings whose linguistically fashioned contests and collusions for power endow words, phrases, gestures, and images with multiple significations.

Likewise, I would argue that rather than banishing authors and their intentions from our analytic armories, we should recognize that the independence of the meaning of texts from the intentions of authors is a product of the multiplicity of divergent intentionalities -- supported by divergent resources -- that interact in the production of meaning in social life. Deconstruction, in other words, is useful as an analytical strategy because it alerts us not only to the instabilities of meanings in texts, but points us toward the possible sources of those instabilities in the socio-linguistic interactions in which willful but constrained human actors construct and deconstruct meaning in the first place. If, as Scott asserts, knowledge constructs power and power constructs knowledge, they do so through the medium of human action in the world.

I think Scott is right to insist on the need for deconstructive strategies in the writing of the history of gender -- or of any kind of history. But if deconstruction is to be used by historians, its vocabulary, practice, and epistemology must be modified. Rather than bracketing the world (with its authors and intentions) and focusing exclusively on how texts make meaning, historians need to posit the existence of a world and use the complexities and instabilities of meaning in texts to reconstruct the possible structures and contradictions of past worlds. And rather than focusing exclusively on language and its meanings, historians must try to recover past human experiences as they are manifested in (usually textual) documents. By experience, I do not mean some sort of raw events that happen to people independently of their cultural understandings and linguistic capacities, but precisely the linguistically shaped process of weighing and assigning meaning to events as they happen. Again, slightly modified deconstructive strategies, which would emphasize the

ambiguities, hazards, and instability of this process of assigning meaning -- for example, by making it possible to puzzle out how the intended meanings of actions are frustrated or renegotiated in practice -- seem particularly well adapted to this task.

This sort of revised historical deconstructionism would imply devoting greater attention to women's (and men's) experiences than Scott has done in most of the essays in this book. For it would imply that in addition to analyses that show how past and present texts incorporate and encode unequal gender relations, we should also trace out how ideas and assumptions about gender are challenged, confounded, reinforced, misconstrued, and transformed when applied in practice in the lives of real men and women. Such analyses -- and Scott's insightful essay on women in the American historical profession is a promising step in that direction -- could demonstrate that deconstructionist method, properly reconceptualized for the practice of history, can illuminate past experience as brilliantly as it illuminates past texts. Scott's provocative book has not solved all the theoretical or practical problems entailed in a deconstructive approach to the history of gender or to history in general. But its clarity of language, its theoretical good sense, its political lucidity, its incisive critiques, and its intriguing analyses of historical events point the way toward an important renovation of historical practice, one that has the potential of moving gender from the periphery to the center of history and of historical understanding.

NOTES

1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
2. Originally published in The American Historical Review 91 (1986), 1053-75.
3. See, especially, Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly, Women, Work, and Family (New York: Holt, Reinhardt and Winston, 1978).
4. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971); Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (New York: Vintage Press, 1973).
5. Gareth Stedman Jones, Languages of Class: Studies in Working Class History, 1832-1982 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).
6. William H. Sewell, Jr., Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
7. A recent collection that explores the problem of masculinity in a number of social science fields is Michael S. Kimmel, ed. Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1987). For explorations of the problem of masculine gender identity in literature, see Coppelia Kahn, Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981) and David Leverenz, Manhood and the American Renaissance (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).
8. Women's Review of Books, 6, (January, 1989), 19-20.
9. In this criticism I focus specifically on Derridian literary deconstructionism rather than on Foucault, whom Scott also cites with approval, for two reasons. First, Scott's actual methodology is essentially deconstructionist, whereas what she takes from Foucault are background

assumptions, such as that notion that power and knowledge are tightly linked. Second, Foucault, unlike the Derridians who generally bracket the world and focus exclusively on texts, is obsessed with making sense of past worlds, however uncertain the epistemological status of such worlds in his writings. In this respect, in spite of his insistence that he did not write history, he shares a common terrain with historians.

